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Nested dolls: 'Inner storytelling' and the creative writing process

Abstract

In 2008, life, as I had known it for the preceding four years, ended. I had been living in the red majesty of Australia's Central Desert, building a career from a rich and unique professional platform, and personally, I had fallen in love. However, between the lines of this white-girl-in-the-outback postcard was the overwhelming reality of the 2007 Northern Territory Intervention and a hidden abusive relationship. This is a story within the story of a story, of what severance leaves in its wake; how after leaving my desert life behind, I rediscovered creative writing and through writing fiction began to edit what Maria Popova calls my 'inner storytelling' (Popova 2013b), learning to 'draw positive meaning' (Perry 2012: 77) from traumatic experience. This is a story written from what Avery F Gordon describes as my 'haunting place', 'conjuring' my 'ghosts' to 'put life back in' to my memories (Gordon 2008: 22). This is 'that sore place' Tom Spanbauer says is 'within each of us that is the source for stories that no one else can tell'; this is how I began to embrace writing fiction as 'the lie that tells the truth truer', through the act of what he calls 'dangerous writing' (Spanbauer nd).

Keywords: inner storytelling, dangerous writing, creative writing process

My upbringing was quintessentially Australian. I was raised by the sea, browned by the sun, and accustomed to such balmy temperatures that wearing socks heralded a bitter winter. My family was working class but we lived an idyllic lifestyle. That was the 'Aussie' way. I received a good education through state schooling. Writing was my forte. In primary school I learned that Captain James Cook 'discovered' Australia in 1770 when he landed at Botany Bay; the beginning of Australia's story.

When I was nine, my parents moved my two-year-old brother and me to North America. We lived on the road in a converted GMC van, driving from the north to the south of the west coast and across the interior, following national park to national park as our guides. I met Inuit people, and Hopi people; I walked by the gaping mouths of ancient blue Alaskan glaciers, gazed up at the claw marks a giant bear had made chasing two young grizzlies up Devil's Tower in Wyoming; I stood on the precipice of Colorado's Mesa Verde and gazed into the history of Pueblo culture. I sat at John Muir's writing desk in California and followed his footsteps through the green wonderland of Yosemite, I traced dinosaur fossils through the yellow dust of South Dakota's Badlands, scrambled up red rock to overlook Monument Valley in Utah, and in Vancouver where we stayed for a while, I went to school with Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim friends.

We returned to Australia when I was eleven. That was 1991.

In high school I elected to study Modern History and was taught how other countries were colonised and of the world's great wars. Throughout my travels and education I learned nothing of Australia's history pre-1770. As far as I understood, there was nothing more to know.

After university, in 2003 I moved from coastal Queensland to remote Northern Territory (NT). Accepting a job with the Australian Federal Government, I spent four years in the Central Desert as Senior Media Officer (SMO) of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park (UKTNP). I lived in Mutitjulu, the Aboriginal community at the base of Uluru, and worked with global media to ensure Anangu sacred sites were not compromised by commercial image use, filming, or photography. Essentially, it was my responsibility to uphold the values of a culture that was totally foreign to me and yet fundamentally Australian. Prior to my desert life, I, a well-travelled, white, working-class woman from the Gold Coast, had never met an Indigenous Australian.

My experience living and working at Uluru revolved around how sharing stories there was the tool that reshaped my understanding of self and my identity as an Australian, and how, through the power of storytelling, I was able to bridge universal issues of prejudice, racism, misunderstanding, and ignorance, at an individual level. As storyteller and psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estès says, 'story is far older than the art and science of psychology, and will always be the elder in the equation no matter how much time passes' (Estès 1995: 19-20).

Prior to moving to Central Australia my perception of its landscape was one based on folklore, hardship, and mystery. Like the dark woods in Germanic fairytales, the Red Centre seemed a wild place where strange and dangerous things happened: backpackers were murdered, dingoes stole children, crocodiles lurked until they were brutalised by Paul Hogan, and early European explorers met their doom. Given my limited knowledge, it made no sense that I used precious baggage space to take with me a large set of babushka dolls I was given as a child in Alaska. It seemed a random choice at the time but then so too was my decision to move from the southeast tropical coast of Queensland to the semi-arid desert of the Northern Territory. Having travelled overseas, I wanted to know more of what was in my own 'backyard'. I was untethered, unemployed, and, an aspiring writer, I craved a life rich with stories. In hindsight, even if I had known what remote community living would involve (the nearest shop for new underwear was a 1000-kilometre round trip away), I still would have taken those nested dolls with me. They became the one thing I relied on seeing at the end of every day in the desert, sitting unpacked from smallest to tallest on my desk, by my window with the view of endless red sand dunes and an uncontained blue sky.

This article is much like those dolls. It is a story within a story within a story of my life at Uluru. It could be an extension of my experience in learning how storytelling can bridge cultural diversity. It could also be a review of that experience, revealing what lay beneath. Or, this article could be read on its own merit. It could be a story about learning to acknowledge what writer Maria Popova calls 'inner storytelling' and 'mastering the art of vulnerability' (Popova 2013b) by using creative writing to 'draw positive meaning' (Perry 2012: 77) from 'significant traumatic experiences' (Baddeley & Pennebaker 2011: 87). This is a story of how writing fiction became a means to explore traumatic memory.

In the last few years I have talked at conferences across Europe about my experience living in a remote Central Australian community. I tell some stories I learned while I was there, stories I was not taught in school, about Australia's history and its people, which wholly diversified and enriched my understanding of what it means to me to be both an Australian, and a global citizen. I describe the colour of the immensely affecting and foreign yet majestic landscape, and I share how I learned fundamental life lessons: by shutting up and opening my ears.

What I have never said in my presentations is how my time living and working at Uluru ended, and why. I do not speak about how I left, or 'the kind of visible invisibility: *I see you are not there*' (Gordon 2008: 16) I have experienced since leaving. Prior to this act of writing I have never discussed that, for the most part, the life I lived at Uluru was a house of cards.

Though I loved the challenges and rewards of my job and relished exploring my desert surroundings, my personal life at Uluru was a facade. Most of my energy was spent hiding the physical and psychological abuse of a violent man I was in a relationship with at the time. I kept up this appearance until I finally acknowledged I was at risk, emotionally and geographically isolated with this volatile secret. After living at Uluru for four years, I left on a Sunday morning without farewell, or resolution. I was at work on Friday as usual, but by Monday I had vanished. With the help of a few colleagues I had fled, after it had become clear that such an action was the only one to take.

Overnight I was back in my childhood room in my family's seaside home. Red dirt spilled from the unpicked seams of my life. I recoiled at the sight of it. In the mornings my mother had hushed conversations on the telephone. She would stroke my hair and leave for work. Literally a few moments later my father would arrive, pat my hand, and open the paper.

I noticed I was living with blind spots. I could not face any aspect of the brutal, beautiful place I had left behind, or how deeply I missed it. I would not look at photos, or go near social media. I tried to avoid triggers, which was difficult given Uluru's iconic status and Muṯitjulu's recent media attention, which in my job I had been heavily involved in. I was dogged by my grief for the extraordinary landscape, life, and love I had uprooted myself from, and the slippery after-effects of the violent relationship I had left behind.

As UKTNP's Senior Media Officer, my role had essentially been to provide a conduit between the park and global commercial media; travel shows, documentaries, wildlife photographers, and the like. However the position became far more treacherous when responsibility fell to the SMO to manage the intense media scrutiny on the park and Muṯitjulu Community through the 2006 Greg Andrews/*Lateline* affair, the consequent *Little Children Are Sacred Report* and 2007 NT Intervention, the 2008 Rudd government election, and subsequent National Apology. To say the least, it was an intense experience, which was not contained within my professional life. Living and working in the same environment amongst the same people (my partner and I both worked for UKTNP, our colleagues were our neighbours), my professional and personal lives at Uluru were entangled. By the time I left in 2008 I was unable to distinguish the traumatic stress of one from the other and so became a pot in which both melted.

After leaving, I was incapacitated by shame and felt forced into what writer Emma Brockes describes as the 'blast zone' (Brockes 2013) of grief. I functioned at the most basic level and had nothing left for anything else. Driving two blocks to the video store left me a shaking mess. I could not accept

my circumstances: the totality of my departure from my desert life, or that I had been in an abusive relationship, let alone that it was over. That particular acknowledgement was unfathomable. To define myself as ‘abused’, or worse, as a ‘victim’ of domestic violence, was the main source of my shame, and made me vulnerable to ‘the misconception that women who are abused by their partners are weak and passive, perhaps even masochistic or stupid’, which also implies ‘that the problem lies within the woman, and not her abusive partner’ (Doane 1996: 4).

In those fledgling months after my life at Uluru ended, I was at a stalemate. By only functioning, I remained in Brockes’ ‘blast zone’, that place where ‘every action brought pain, as did all previous enthusiasms’ (Brockes 2013). My best friend, on the other side of the country at the time, provided the tough-love catalyst. *We who love you can only do so much. Get yourself to counselling. I’m here for the aftermath.*

The first psychologist I met with let me cry. She specialised in cognitive behavioural therapy. There was a painting on her wall I stared at while I turned her box of tissues into papier-mâché.

Holly, what’s your story?

I started to talk about my failed relationship, and what the desert meant to him.

No. She shook her head. What is your story?

Again, my story was about another person. She folded her hands in her lap.

When you sacrifice what you are made of, when you are cut off from the story that makes you who you are, that’s when things break down and go fundamentally wrong.

I stared at the painting on the psychologist’s wall, at those thick, dark red circles, separated from an empty sky by an ochre line. I was a mere whiff of who I knew myself to be. I was fading, and felt severed from my story, from my ‘deep, instinctual psyche’ (Estès 1995: 10). I did not understand that every choice I had been making in my life at Uluru – what I wore, how I interacted with friends or colleagues, how I laughed, who I spoke to, where I went, what I talked about, even what I thought – had not been self-expression. Rather, my behaviour had been carefully constructed from fear, modified to satisfy another person in an effort to protect myself. ‘These severances are a disease not of an era or a century, but become an epidemic anywhere and anytime women are captured, anytime [her] nature has become entrapped’ (Estès 1995: 10).

Most of my life at Uluru was lived out of fear and shame; every inner story I told myself would make my life easier, eventually led to the severance of my Self. I internalised everything, because of shame. ‘Shame thrives on secret-keeping’ (Brown 2012: 82). I did everything I could to hide what was happening in my personal life and how I was beginning to consequently unravel. ‘You are only as sick as your secrets’ (Warren 2002: 213). As I kept the violence of my partner a secret, I kept myself sick. This sense of going unheard, of secret keeping, was echoed in my job as the national park staff and community suffered the consequences of the NT Intervention. Mutitjulu was not adequately consulted or supported before it was put under administration. Park staff were not adequately consulted or supported before fundamental changes were made to the park’s operational procedures. The secrets and stress in my professional and personal lives were entangled.

I was terrified of my own vulnerability. I perceived it as shameful and weak, so developed strategies to avoid feeling vulnerable. 'I performed until there was no energy left to feel' (Brown 2012: 55). I made a performance of making myself small. I shrunk my feelings and instincts until they no longer seemed a threat. At work I stayed quiet and followed procedure, not speaking up for what I believed in. In my relationship I stayed quiet and did not defend myself, staying small to keep the man I loved happy. It was exhausting. The longer I denied myself the truth, the more severed I became from my true self.

Three months after leaving Uluru I grew restless in my family home. Without anything to distract me, my secrets, shame, and memories took possession of my mind. I made a few phone calls, and within a week moved interstate for a new job. My father drove me south and stayed in my new city for a few days to help me settle. He stood at the airport clutching his cap between his hands as I waved goodbye reassuringly.

The night before I started my new position I cut my hip-length hair off to within an inch of my scalp. Unable to throw it in the rubbish and unsure of what to do with it otherwise, I wrapped my shorn hair in a purple silk dress, a favourite from my desert life, and tucked the bundle away in a cupboard to be forgotten. I did not recognise myself in the mirror, and enjoyed the anonymity.

I waited for things to get better in my new and empty surroundings, but like the fairytale in which a woman focuses on acquiring more mattresses instead of addressing the troublesome pea, the unresolved trauma of my inner narratives haunted me (Andersen 1976: 29). Avery F Gordon seeks 'a language for identifying hauntings and for writing with the ghosts any haunting inevitably throws up' in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Gordon 2008: 7). 'Essentially [Gordon] believes ghosts to be personal figures, social figures, and institutions (shaped by history) that reproduce power relations and structures of inequality' (Runyan & Schiff 2008).

At that time an obvious example of a ghost in my personal life was domestic violence. 'A haunting, as defined by Gordon, [is] the constant reappearance of the ghost' (Runyan & Schiff 2008). Thus, my recurring subservient behaviour after leaving the violent relationship was the haunting of my ghost. Being haunted entrapped me within 'furniture without memories', a phrase Gordon borrows from Toni Morrison and explains as 'that sad and sunken couch that sags in just that place where an unrememberable past and an unimaginable future force us to sit day after day' (Gordon 2012: 4). The haunting of my ghost kept me in limbo, sunken by a past I would not remember and a future I could not foresee. I was silenced by my shame, which kept my secrets unspoken. I could not focus at work. I was restless, forgetful, anxious, and barely coped with menial tasks. My personality had become 'meagre, thin, ghostly, spectral' (Estès 1995: 11). I was afraid of everything.

Eventually the burden of my secrets became too much. I began meeting with Mary, a new psychologist (name changed to protect privacy). 'Psychoanalysis could be the telling of a ghostly story' (Runyan & Schiff 2008). I wanted to name my ghost, and tell its tale, to be unburdened, to be free. However, it was not that simple. Although Mary and I met twice a week, I grappled with talking about my shame, grief, and ghosts. For our first few sessions Mary tried to talk about the effects of PTSD.

I'm not that person, I told her. Post-traumatic Stress is something people who have really suffered experience.

She looked at me for a long time before she asked about the bright pink scars on my eyelids. Two months before I left the desert I flew to Brisbane and underwent eye surgery to correct stress-induced infections in both eyes. I had just undergone the second of what would be three surgeries to eradicate the infections at the time of the PTSD discussion with Mary. Acknowledging the cause of the infections was another secret I kept from admitting to myself, it became another source of shame and humiliation.

At our next session Mary changed tack. *Tell me about writing*, she said.

There was lightness in my chest. Slow to start, my answers soon came freely, about the callus I developed on my middle finger as a girl who gripped her pencil too hard and wrote for too long. About the desk that ran the length of my childhood bedroom wall, that I wrote my stories into the surface of when I ran out of paper. And, about the favourite books I would pack in a bag and take with me to hide in the garden bushes when it was not safe to be in the house. In recounting these memories, I began telling my 'ghost story'.

You must write, Mary said.

My mouth went dry. I had not written in a long time. There was a brief period in the desert when I had tried, but it caused too much conflict in my relationship; what in my writing came from fact, and what was purely fiction? Held liable for the wandering depth and breadth of my imagination, I had hidden it away.

No one's going to read it, she assured me. *Write the stories inside you, the ones you tell yourself. Start with what you remember, or what you desire. You can write the past. And, write your future.*

Mary leaned forward.

They are two separate things, Holly.

She gave me a book to help get me started. I drove home in a stupor.

There was a delicious itch in my fingertips, but an old, loud story dominated my mind. I could not write. I had nothing to say. My imagination was jeopardy, best left alone. However, I was about to learn that inner stories are changeable. As psychotherapist Philippa Perry explains:

The great thing about a story is that it is flexible. We can change a story from one that does not help us to one that does. If the script we have lived by in the past does not work for us anymore we do not need to accept it as our script for the future. (Perry 2012: 73)

That night I changed my old inner story which had oppressed me, into a new one, which permitted and liberated me: I could write, I could create any story I wanted; it was not autobiography, it was just make-believe. It was fiction.

I sat up and wrote until my eyelids were hot and gummy. When I hit a lull, I brewed thick coffee and sipped it while I packed and unpacked the babushka dolls that had left the desert with me. By dawn I had written a short story. I experienced the rush of not only having written something whole for the first time in years, but also the strange and cathartic relief of transferring my ghosts to fiction. 'What goes unsaid, that which is implied and omitted and censured and suggested, acquires the importance of a scream' (Valenzuela 1986: 10).

Through writing I had screamed at the top of my lungs. It was a painful, blissful alchemy.

At my next appointment I clutched my notebook to my chest.

Anything you want to share? Mary raised an eyebrow.

I read every word aloud.

Keep going, she said, nodding. So I did.

However, the stories I was writing were not journalling, as the book Mary had given me suggested I do; the only writing advice I heeded from its pages was: 'This is your story and you have the right to tell it the way you want' (Doane 1996: 7).

I balked at the idea of journalling, or any activity that proposed I explore my vulnerabilities and fears directly – they were things I was desperate to deny, separate myself from, and escape. The only way I could acknowledge my 'haunting and phantoms' (Gordon 2008: 6) was through the obscurity and freedom of writing fiction. Fiction enabled me to draw out my inner narratives, to write past experiences into other story skins, which offered me protection from confrontation. Writing fiction was an act of 'conjuring' shame, secrets, and vulnerabilities:

Conjuring is a particular form of calling up and calling out the forces that make things what they are in order to fix and transform a troubling situation. As a mode of apprehension and reformation, conjuring merges the analytical, the procedural, the imaginative, and the effervescent. (Gordon 2008: 22)

I was not able to conjure my experiences in the cold light of journalling, it felt too confrontational and aggressive an act. I needed to write stories that did not feel autobiographical. I needed to conjure my vulnerabilities and secrets without acknowledging them as such.

Fiction enabled me to do this: the women in my stories were not me. 'In psychoanalytic perspective... "Other" is as primary as consciousness itself' (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi 2012: 300). I wrote the women in my stories as an Other I could approach sideways to empathise with her circumstances and explore her emotions by believing they were abstract to mine. Writing fiction allowed me to engage with memory but from a distance where I was able to occupy the women I wrote about and yet feel separate from them. Through writing fiction I could explore their feelings, notice their actions without judgement, and witness their challenges without being accountable for them. Behind the guise of writing fiction I was able to draw out my inner narratives and confess my vulnerabilities without censoring myself, without being obstructed by shame, secrecy, or fear. 'In psychoanalytic terms "we" project upon the Other, that which is undesirable in ourselves or repressed and buried in our unconscious' (300). It was subconscious; I was compelled to write as an Other as a way of distinguishing myself from who I was at that time to who I was expressing from my past. 'Representing the Other is always a process of ... control, in which the represented is reduced to an object' (299). Writing myself into a fictional Other was a method of objectifying myself to regain some measure of control over my life after feeling I had none.

Unable to assess, consider, or evaluate my professional and personal experiences at Uluru because they were entangled, the only way I began to recover my memories was through writing. Fiction allowed me to begin the

process of disentanglement, to separate myself from damaging experiences, to make characters of the emotions that had been controlling me: grief, fear, anxiety, stress. As Alice Hoffman says, ‘all of [my] characters are a part of me, but they’re working out in their time and place issues that I need to work out in my time and place’ (cited in Marshall 2011).

The following story *The Market Seller* is an example of how I wrote through an Other. A first-person narrator tells the story of the main character through third person observation, ‘the way that people do when they “cannot bear to speak of these things”’ (Estès 1993: 7). I wrote this six months after leaving Uluru. It was one of my first experiences in writing myself as an Other and feeling the consequent catharsis. Writing this story I was able to access emotions I had not previously explored, and imagine being someone else entirely, observing myself through the third-person perspective of the narrator, rather than writing and being responsible for my feelings in a first-person context.

There are some questions to which I know answers. Playing Telemann in my greenhouse lures creamier lilies from the earth. Dusting my garden beds with cinnamon produces the most potent lavender in town, and a spring of unfurled jasmine in a teacup can cure an upset stomach better than a peppermint leaf any day. But how to stop waking every morning with an ache in my centre for a tall blue-eyed stranger, or, if I’ll ever be able to enjoy an apple again, I do not know.

In small circles people still talk about her in feverish whispers.

She only came to the Sunday markets once. Her stall was between the second-hand bookshop and mine; I was filling canisters with water for my fresh-cuts when she arrived.

Her skin had a sallow tinge and her hair was a tangle of knots. Mostly I remember the way her hands shook as she smoothed a piece of tattered velvet over her table and unpacked her assortment of enamel tins. The small flask she held to her lips, wincing as she swallowed, didn’t stop the tremors.

She pinned a small handwritten sign to the velvet. I noticed where the ink in her words had bled.

For sale. 50c each.

Slowly but purposefully she took the lids off the collection of tins and upended them. Piles of rubies tumbled onto the tabletop and glistened in the light. Individually wrapped in cellophane, each red hardboiled candy came with a handwritten tag.

Red desert sunsets

Sandalwood fire

Fairy lights

Green tea stains

Banjo strings

Stolen honey

Summertime bruises

Starless nights

Word spread quickly. The market was abuzz.

I didn’t understand the fuss until I popped one of the sweets into my mouth. The sugar-crystal shell slowly melted into the juice of a ripe pink lady. I could do nothing but close my eyes, hold my hand to my throat, and move my tongue through the morsel.

It was after I felt the last of the red sugar slide down my throat that I noticed the insatiable tartness that lingered.

Underneath the intense sweetness, there was a familiar salty tang.

I found myself reaching for another.

No one has ever admitted it was the strangely comforting flavour of a pinprick or paper cut.

She stayed curled in on herself like a lame thing. Occasionally she would sip from her flask and wipe her eyes.

Her table was empty not long after lunchtime. She unpinned her sign, folded up the velvet cloth with her shaking hands and left. She had not said a word.

That night, the town went to sleep and dreamt of a tall man with blue eyes. The local medical centre has kept Valium and Xanax on backorder ever since.

People don't talk about her openly anymore. There is a resignation to the dreaming fate of those who blindly exchanged spare change for pieces of someone else's heart.

I've never mentioned it, but I thought I saw her again once. It was a few years ago when a weekday travelling market came to town.

She had the same ratty hair and sparrow gait, but her eyes were clear and her skin was lustrous. And, as she unpacked small wooden apples for sale, her hands didn't so much as tremble once.

Writing fiction like *The Market Seller* was a transplant process through which I could graft my emotions and experiences onto an entirely separate body where my memories were safe to breathe – there, but hidden. I could only unearth hope, understand that my future was unwritten, and explore my 'deepest truths' (Hoffman 2011) when I wrote fiction. When I was writing, I was safe. I could confess my vulnerability, grief, and shame. I could explore my secrets. I could try to understand myself.

It was only through writing that I dared to conjure the deepest truth I could not confess anywhere else: I did not want it to be over – the extremity and beauty of my life amongst an ancient, extraordinary landscape and its people, or the extremity and beauty of a love I could not accept was harmful. The latter was the truth I kept most hidden, especially from myself. I wanted the impossible, to undo it all. I was desperate to find the phone call, the door, the gesture, the moment that would make it possible to go back. I struggled between an instinctual knowing and 'will to heal' (Doane 1996: 75) and my seemingly total inability to accept that there was no return, no reunion, no coming home for me. I could not discuss this with family or friends. I did not want to worry them. I did not want them to perceive this vulnerability as a weakness in me; I could barely acknowledge it to myself.

The only way I could unburden myself of this dangerous, deep truth was to graft it onto an Other, written in fiction. The process of seeing and writing myself from a third-person perspective in a fictional narrative created a safe distance to feel vulnerable and explore traumatic memory. This process of Othering allowed me to untangle my sense of self-worth from harmful memories, and gave me the chance to see myself separate from past traumatic experiences. As David Jauss says of writing fiction, 'To be most truly yourself requires hiding yourself ...' (Jauss 2012: 24).

While I was writing fiction, the subconscious I encountered was 'not a fearsome beast in need of obedience training. It [was] the inner seeker-after-truth who must be helped to save [me] from [myself]' (Rayner 1990:13). Like dreaming, writing fiction became a way of helping my mind to 'digest and

regulate negative emotions’ (Popova 2013a). Writing fiction was a way I could consciously take ‘what was new or bothersome and blend it into what the brain already knows, making the new information seem less novel or threatening’ (cited in Popova 2013a). Writing fiction in the months after I left Uluru was like dreaming awake: surreal, painful, lingering, wonderful, and cathartic – after which, as in the moment of waking from a nightmare, I felt purged of something harmful within me. Writing fiction permitted the ‘inner seeker-after-truth’ of my subconscious to ‘put life back in’ (Gordon 2008) to past traumatic experiences, which left unresolved would only have continued to do me harm. I built an inherent trust in this process, and surrounded myself with books for support, reading widely from the magical fiction of Alice Hoffman to the essays on narrative practice by Michael White.

Writing fiction allowed me to begin living a more present inner narrative, rather than reliving one from my past. ‘This use of storytelling help[ed] [me] gain some distance from [myself] and [gave me] perspective’ (Perry 2012: 73), which allowed me to reawaken and retreat within my imagination where I could explore the emotions that underpinned my experiences at Uluru. ‘Stories ... help us escape into our imaginations when there is no escape in reality’ (73).

It soon became apparent how expressing myself through fiction was reducing ‘the harmful effects of stress and trauma’ on my ‘health and wellbeing’ (Lepore & Smyth 2002: 3). I started to sleep better. I joined a yoga meditation class. My short-term memory improved. I said yes to friends. I felt able.

My life began to regain some degree of traction. I wrote with feverish curiosity to see what might surface in my short stories, vignettes and novellas, driven by a need to understand the chaos, the anarchy and the extremity of my emotions. I needed to feel able to turn my life from ‘straw into gold’, as Alice Hoffman says of why she writes (Casavant 2013). I wanted to make stories of my story. Philippa Perry helps to explain why:

Our stories give shape to our inchoate, disparate, fleeting impressions of everyday life. They bring together the past and the future into the present to provide us with structures for working towards our goals. They give us a sense of identity, and, most importantly, serve to integrate the feelings of our right brain with the language of our left. (Perry 2012: 74)

When I left the desert, trying to recall my Uluru stories independent of the events I experienced there was like being shortsighted and trying to navigate a dark horizon unaided. I was not able to draw any positive meaning from what I now reflect on as one of the most enriching experiences of my life. Writing fiction is how this began to change. Creative writing provided ‘opportunities for habituation’ (Baddeley & Pennebaker 2011: 87) within my inner stories, which caused me to react differently than I had been to the same recurring stimulus from past ‘significant traumatic experiences’ (87). Instead of triggering repeated reactions to my past at Uluru, recalling my memories through the guise of writing fiction enabled me to consider them from a protective distance, which changed my ‘emotional experience’ of them ‘by promoting the cognitive labeling and representation of previously amorphously experienced emotions’ (87). By abstractly projecting my ‘experienced emotions’ onto an Other in fiction I discovered a new, safe way to explore them, and learned to integrate ‘those emotions into the broader context of [my] life’ (88), rather than allowing them to be the context of my life.

After nearly a year of writing fiction, distancing myself from my personal experience and exploring my grief through what Emma Brockes calls the ‘the

liberating apparatus of metaphor' (*The Guardian* 2013), I noticed my inner narratives were beginning to change. Professor Sana Loue explains how and why metaphor can be liberating for those suffering trauma:

Like the sugar that helps the medicine go down, the use of metaphor helps clients tolerate the unpleasantness that they may experience on their journeys to self-knowledge. A safe space is created in which the client can develop [her] own own identity, sometimes embedded in story, using metaphor as a basis. The metaphor creates the opportunity for the client as ... the writer ... to determine the beginning, middle, and hoped-for end of their [story]. (Loue 2008: 12)

I knew how the inner story I was stuck in had begun. Through writing fiction and using metaphor, I was able to 'tolerate the unpleasantness' of processing my experiences, and I began to determine what the 'middle, and hoped-for end' of my story actually was. Through the process of writing fiction, the story tapes I had been telling myself on a loop lost momentum. I was not thinking in the same ways as I had done, a development Philippa Perry attributes to what happens when we acknowledge our story sticking points:

We need to look at the repetitions in the stories we tell ourselves and at the process of the stories rather than merely their surface content. Then we can begin to experiment with changing the filter through which we look at the world, start to edit the story, and thus regain flexibility where we have been getting stuck. (Perry 2012: 84)

Though I was not writing directly about my life at Uluru, I was still writing from a place of deep emotional truth and in doing so began to change the filter through which I was forming my perceptions. Writing fiction was how I started to edit the recurrent patterns within my 'consistent self-narrative' (Perry 2012: 74), which essentially is to say that it was through fiction that I found my way to tell my 'ghost stories' and address my 'haunting'. Writing gave me the flexibility and the determination to develop beyond who I was when I left Uluru, where I was stuck. The more fiction I wrote, the more open I became to the possibility and the hope that in some way the richness of the experiences I had lived there would become greater than the trauma I had left behind.

There were two trees I would seek out most days after work, when I would wander the desert landscape at dusk. They were *kurkara*, desert oaks; tall, old, and regal with long sweeping branches and soft needles. I would often stop to stand between the two of them and listen to the desert breeze, to the sound of the sun setting and the colours thrown across the unencumbered sky. I would sit and look up at their branches. They were grandmotherly in character, and just as enchanting.

Recalling their memory now without being tainted by any other, and feeling calm to do so, is a life-changing victory: the moment a shortsighted person wears prescription lenses and sees the molten seam of a cloud on the dark horizon. Editing the repetitive patterns within my inner storytelling to the effect that I could recall a memory of the desert without triggering surrounding traumatic memories was:

[M]ore positively life changing than winning the lottery... A lot of money does not change our emotional life. The way we talk to and about ourselves and the way in which we edit our own stories, can and does. (Perry 2012: 73)

Once I remember those trees, I feel I cannot stop. I see the gullies the desert oaks stood in, the hue of the sunset light on their needle fronds, the silent silhouetted presence of Uluru behind us, the sound of the birds as dusk settles, the last fingers of light making phosphorescence of the spinifex clumps around my feet, and the astonishing peace I feel within my body in this moment to be there, home again, with the red light on my skin and the dry desert breeze on my face. This moment is untangled within me. Amidst the trauma that is on its periphery, this stand-alone memory in my mind is ‘an act of defiance and hope’ (Perry 2012: 73).

What I could not have imagined when I sat down at my desk that night Mary suggested I write, was that I was starting an incantation, an irreversible declaration of intent: I would not be defined in my future by where my story had been stuck at Uluru, in the past. I had no idea that the stories I was writing would become ‘orientation devices, functioning like compasses and maps’ to allow me to ‘feel more centred, connected, more conscious, aware of my identities, responsibilities, and my relationship to the rest of the world’ (Vogler 2007: 300). The fiction I wrote during that period of my life enabled me to glimpse life beyond where I was stuck and envision what might be possible. In essence, the fictional stories I wrote aspirated me and helped me to understand that I was not only my memories, I was also my future, and everything that was yet to happen to me.

When I started writing fiction in 2008 I could never have fathomed that, a year later, I would leave Australia with two bags and a box of books to move to England, a country I did not know, to pursue writing at an academic level which had only ever been the merest smoke of a dream, or that the fiction I had written would be the portfolio responsible for my postgraduate offer.

Nor would I have dared to think that on my fourth day in Manchester I would meet the kindest man, and years later it would be with him that I would do the unthinkable and return to Uluru. Through his awe of the desert, and its colour, beauty, stories, people, heat, and never-ending skies, I would relive and remember why it is still so important to me. I could not have imagined that we would spend our last night there lying on the warm red earth watching the unfettered stars, and in that moment, I would fully understand that ‘when we assert intuition, we are therefore like the starry night: we gaze at the world through a thousand eyes’ (Estès 1995: 11). Neither could I have imagined that I would stand once more between those two grandmother desert oaks, an epilogue freshly buried in the red dirt at my feet, a corner of purple silk poking out of the oak needles and seed pods around me.

Five years ago, when I sat at my desk and began to write I was not aware that word-by-word I was laying down the outline of who I instinctually knew myself to be, and that in doing so I was re-storying my inner narrative, writing myself into a life I yearned for.

It is in the performance of an expression that we re-experience, re-live, re-create, re-tell, re-construct, and re-fashion our culture. The performance does not release a pre-existing meaning that lies dormant in the text... Rather the performance itself is constitutive. (Bruner 1986: 11)

At that time, I did not foresee that I would one day be capable of reflecting on my experiences at Uluru as being cause, effect and means from which I could learn to draw ‘new meanings, bringing with them desired possibilities’ that I would ‘experience as more helpful, satisfying, and open-ended’ (White & Epston 1990: 15).

The year I spent writing after I left the desert was the beginning of my lesson in understanding ‘stories are medicine ... embedded with instructions to guide us through the complexities of life and enable us to understand the need for, and the ways to raise a submerged archetype’ (Estès 1995: 15). Through writing fiction, I began to recover.

The remedies for repair or reclamation of any lost psychic drive are contained in stories. Stories engender the excitement, sadness, questions, longing, and understandings that spontaneously bring the archetype [the intuitive psyche] back to the surface. (Estès 1995: 15)

And yet... learning how to acknowledge and edit unhelpful inner narratives through writing fiction was still to touch on the deepest story I have kept hidden away. Despite almost completely changing my life to pursue writing by moving to the UK, fiction to me has, up until now, been about writing as an Other, and shying away from my deepest truths as sources of fictional inspiration. For the first few years after leaving Uluru, even after starting my new writing life in England, I did not understand what I was capable of as a writer, or how I could take something from my past and through writing fiction turn it into a story to be shared. I had not truly experienced the symbiosis Alice Hoffman describes:

[Writers] take the world that we know and we reshape it. In doing so we see behind veils, beneath doors, through the dark glass of the past. What we are left with is a circle of shining light, a creation that is both the miracle and the charm, something one must share to give it any worth at all, a story. (Hoffman 2011)

I began to learn about the worth of my stories and what the craft of being a writer might mean on a trip to Bulgaria in 2010. A Bulgarian charity invited me to run a two-day workshop, first with Bulgarian academics, and subsequently with high school students.

Please talk about why stories are important, the organisers asked me. Why stories help.

My paper was full of other people’s experiences and examples. At that stage, I had not ever spoken publicly of my experiences living in Central Australia. By the time I reached my hotel in Sofia I knew there was only one story I could tell. Sitting at my window overlooking the city’s fusion of past and present, I went through my photographs from Uluru for the first time since I left. I carefully selected a slideshow of images, reminded myself of the grandmother desert oaks, and caught a taxi to the conference centre. By accepting an opportunity to share the stories from Uluru I was comfortable telling, I created a new purpose for my past.

If we practice detachment from our thoughts we learn to observe them as though we are taking a bird’s eye view of our own thinking. When we do this, we might find that our thinking belongs to an older, and different, story to the one we are now living. (Perry 2012: 82)

When a group of Bulgarian academics queued after my presentation wanting more information on Indigenous Australia, and later when high school students gathered for a photo and yelled a word I had taught them – “PALYA” – at the

camera, I finally understood that my experiences at Uluru could be about so much more than what caused me to leave. (In addition to being a word used widely across Asia to describe eternity, and quantify the time involved in achieving Nirvana, *palya* is also used in the Pitjantjatjara lands of Australia's Central Desert to express, in its most basic meaning, *good*.)

After the workshops ended the conference organizer, who is now a dear friend, took me to Mount Vitosha where we walked across a lake of stones together. We stopped amongst the mossy silver boulders slick with ice, where my friend told me the story of her girlhood when she had clambered over the giant stones to stand in that very spot and shout her heart's desires into the valley below. Every time she returns the stones remind her that she wanted to change the world, a memory she told me helped her through the challenges of founding the charity I was there for, which advocates the necessity of inclusive education for children. *Places remember your stories, Pinta-Pinta*, she said, calling me a nickname she had remembered from my stories that I had not heard someone call me in a long time. *Places are your memories. Don't turn your back on them for too long*. I thought I understood what she meant when I returned to Uluru in 2012, and buried my hair in the earth of my grandmother trees. I suspect now that there might be more to it.

At a global storytelling conference in Prague this year, I gave another presentation using photographs to lead my room of international colleagues through my experiences growing up in Australia, the evolution of my identity as an Australian, and living in, then leaving the desert. Afterwards, I was asked: *What are you going to do with your story, now?* I averted my eyes and mumbled something about using my experiences as inspiration for an unrelated fiction project I was undertaking in my doctorate.

What I was not prepared for when I left Uluru, or in the five years since, is that the stories of my desert life would refuse my demand that they sink within me and become dormant and silent, as I had wished them to. They have a life of their own.

Stories define who we are and who we wish to be. They warn, they remind, they cut so deeply they can leave a scar. If left untold, they can linger and grow heavier, for every tale is made for two: the teller and the listener. The writer and the reader. (Hoffman 2011)

I have spent a long time believing that I wanted to forget; to erase, hide, and deny the years of my life I spent living in the remote centre of Australia where I experienced an immense time in Australia's political history, my life pitched against the backdrop of a mythical and staggeringly beautiful landscape, and affected in every way by the love I found there. Lately I have become aware of the very real possibility that this kind of amnesia I have so strongly desired for that part of my life belongs to an old story I have been telling myself, and might no longer be of use to me.

Up until this year, the way I have drawn on past experience and written myself as an Other into fiction has felt as though I have been discovering myself whilst at the same time keeping myself hidden in my writing. Up until this year, I was comfortable in my writing style and process. In June 2013, what I believed about myself as a writer was changed irrevocably by two things: a revelatory meeting with my PhD supervisors, and, learning about what Tom Spanbauer calls 'dangerous writing'.

[Dangerous writing] is the act of being honest with oneself on paper. On the surface, that may not seem like a dangerous or even daring act. But it is. When the words one believes to be [a] truth ... are actually written, they take on a power that is no longer exclusively controlled by the writer. The spin that could be applied when the ideas were merely in a person's mind or coming out of a person's mouth melt away. The words lay the heart bare for all to see. Those words become a separate entity, an unflinching, unvarnished document of the self. (Nye Beach Writers 2002)

Following the discussion with my supervisors and further reading on Tom Spanbauer's work, I became aware that as far as 'dangerous writing' goes with my deepest, truest story, I have not yet begun. I have not used 'fiction as the lie that tells the truth truer' (Spanbauer, nd). Up until this point, I have used fiction as the lie that tells the truth by keeping it hidden.

The idea of writing my truth into fiction makes me balk. Maybe I am aware of what I would be opening myself up to with this manner of self re-storying. Perhaps I understand already 'that ghosts are never innocent: the unhallowed [past] of the modern project drag[s] in the pathos of [its] loss and the violence of the force that made [it]' (Gordon 2008: 22). Perhaps I am still afraid of my past. I take solace in something Alice Hoffman said recently in a conversation about surviving breast cancer and how she came to write about it creatively:

I had to be far enough away [from my experience], I had to have hope before I could write it. ...I think the process of writing [trauma] gets you a little further away from it. It's in the past when you write about it. (Hoffman & Leary 2013)

This is what emboldens me: using 'fiction as the lie to tell the truth truer', as an act of putting what I have survived behind me. That I am afraid of doing this is the very point of 'writing dangerously'. It is 'going to that place inside ... that is hidden and secret' (cited in Gabettas 2011) and exploring what scares and shames me, to investigate my vulnerability and write from that place, to express my fears artistically and honestly. When thinking about why, or where and how I would even begin to write about the ghosts that haunt me despite how I fear them, I look to Avery F Gordon to help me understand.

To be haunted and to write from that location, to take on the condition of what you study, is not a methodology or consciousness you can simply adopt or adapt as a set of rules or an identity; it produces its own insights and blindnesses. Following the ghosts is about making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located. It is about putting life back in where only a vague memory or bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look. It is sometimes about writing ghost stories, stories that not only repair representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, toward a countermemory, for the future. (Gordon 2008: 22)

The experience of writing this very essay inspires me; the idea of 'putting life back in', of having an opportunity to 'repair representational mistakes' and 'strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced', thus creating a 'countermemory' for my future. I do not feel that any fiction I have written thus far has achieved what I suspect an act of 'dangerous writing' could

in relation to ‘following the ghosts’. I feel, for the first time since I left, that this is true: I want to write fiction that has red dirt all through it, the way my life has had since the day I arrived and unpacked my nested dolls.

The giants on my bookshelves beseech me with their wisdom. ‘What are the best things and the worst things in your life, and when are you going to get around to whispering or shouting them?’ (Bradbury 1990: 5). Whispering will be a start. I have come to think that the time between my last day in the desert and this moment of writing has been time needed for sowing seeds waiting to sprout. ‘Our senses by themselves are dumb. They take in experience, but they need the richness of sifting for a while through our consciousness and through our whole bodies. I call this “composting”’ (Goldberg 2005: 15).

While I till the earth of my composted experiences, continuing to dig up the landscapes of my memories, and turn the sod to unearth what I have worked so hard to forget, I recall what Chilean filmmaker Patricio Guzmán said in his recent documentary, *Nostalgia for the Light*: ‘I am convinced memory has a gravitational force’ (Guzmán 2011). I fled the beauty and trauma of my desert life believing my survival and recovery depended on exiling myself from my experiences there. Five years later, the ‘gravitational force’ of my memories appears to be pulling me back, pushing me forward, and altering the future direction of my story; it is agitating.

We must continue to work the compost pile, enriching it and making it fertile so that something beautiful may bloom and so that our writing muscles are in good shape to ride the universe when it moves through us. (Goldberg 2005: 16)

The grandmother desert oaks I sought out every day were once saplings that had to wait until their roots travelled down deep enough to reach the water table before they opened their branches and flourished. For the first time since I left it behind, red dirt has begun to creep into my notebooks, into my margins, into my ink. As writer Anna Funder says, ‘we don’t know ourselves. We don’t know what we are capable of until we write those selves into being’ (Funder 2013: 9).

My house in England has a small room with one window where I sit and write. The wall in front of my desk is painted blue, the same colour as my memory of an uncontained sky. There is a large corkboard to the left of my desk, tacked with collected scraps and scribbles. In the top left hand corner there is a single photo. It is of a girl with her back to the camera. She stands on a warm, red sand dune, gazing at Uluru in the distance. She faces a heavy, bruised sky. But her shoulders are square.

Behind me, the walls are lined with shelves. I arranged my desk this way intentionally.

While I sit here writing, I know they are there, just over my shoulder. A well-travelled set of nested dolls. Unpacked and arranged in a row, smallest to tallest.

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